

Forced migration and living between cities: Young Syrian adults in Beirut

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by
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IN the context of the recent so-called refugee ‘crisis’, attention has been given to how train stations in large cities become important transit hubs for forced migrants, on makeshift camps of tents which appeared around such transit hubs, and on several urban infrastructures, such as old sport stadiums and airports which were used to ‘host’ or ‘exclude’ forced migrants. However, less attention has been directed to other types of expressions dynamics between forced migration in urban areas. Through his research, Oesch looks closer at how the last decade’s unrest in the Middle East and the resulting displacement have impacted the urban space in less visible ways. Or, put in other words, how cities play an important role in the lives of displaced for less visible reasons.

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People gathering in front of a theatre showing a Syrian theatre play in Beirut, 2016. © Lucas Oesch

In my research, I examine some of the underexplored links between cities and displacement in the context of the Syrian crisis, focusing on the 2011-2016 time period. I do this by analysing how some young Syrian adults belonging mainly to the middle-class had progressively decided to relocate to cities in countries bordering Syria (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) since the start of the Syrian conflict. I begin by highlighting the importance of centrality for these migrants, i.e. of living in central areas of cities. I also underline the strategies used to secure accommodation. I then present how some young Syrian adults were living between urban centralities, commuting back and forth on a regular basis between multiple cities and countries, including sometimes their home town. Finally, I show how this search for new centralities was often perceived as a temporary move, before being able to either settle back home, or move further.

To illustrate these uses of urban space, and their impacts on cities, I will refer mainly to young Syrian adults who I encountered in Beirut between 2011 and 2016 while conducting field research. They were mostly moving alone, i.e. they were single and did not have any children. There was often a mix of motivations according to which they decided to move, and these reasons were often entangled. They were ranging from having lost their occupations in Syria, or part of it, because of the crisis, to avoiding compulsory military service or because of political views, and more generally due to the lack of security and (economic) perspectives in their country. Their move was thus situated somewhere between forced and voluntary displacement. Some young Syrians also noted that a large number of their acquaintances had come to Beirut, or travelled even further.

The Lebanese capital is only a few hours drive from the Syrian capital, Damascus. In 2016, Lebanon hosted about 1 million Syrian refugees. Among 30,000 of them were in the Beirut Governorate, which does not include surrounding municipalities connected to the municipality of Beirut. Many more resided in these peripheral areas of the capital. Moreover, these numbers only included people registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Many others took the decision not to register. This was the case for a majority of young adults I meet. They were generally stressing that the reason why they did not register was because they did not feel ‘in need’. A report was mentioning an overall estimation of a number of 1.55 million Syrians in this situation in Lebanon. It is referring to them as mostly ‘middle-class professionals and wealthy Syrians’. Some of them were already in Lebanon prior to the

start of the crisis in their country, but from then on unable to return. This is certainly a simplified categorisation as, for example, numerous less well-off seasonal migrant workers should also be included in that group. And they also had been moving back and forth between Syria and Lebanon for a long time. Most of the young adults I met, however, fitted in the ‘middle-class professionals’ category.

Searching for centrality

Upon arrival in Beirut, most of the young Syrian adults I encountered decided to settle and live in areas of the Lebanese capital which represent important poles of urban centrality (mostly in the neighbourhoods referred to as Hamra and Achrafieh). These locations were important in terms of re-creating social networks, in part with other Syrians who had also moved to Beirut. It was also important in order to find work opportunities and to live in, or near, the vibrant areas of the city. For many, this search for urban centrality was however not completely new in their lives. Many of these young adults had in fact, already before 2011, been attracted by this centrality when in Syria, and above all in Damascus. For those who were not originally from Damascus, many had been living for some time in the Syrian capital. They had moved there from their hometown, mainly to complete their higher education, or in order to find work opportunities.

This search for centrality required finding an accommodation. When in Syria, especially if they were not originally from Damascus, and if they did not have any relatives living there, young Syrian adults were often renting rooms in old damascene houses and more recent flats in several central areas of the Syrian capital (e.g. the Old City, Sarouja, Shaalan). Some of them would even rent whole houses or flats, and sublet rooms to other young people. These accommodations would also often be shared with young foreigners who were coming for short periods to Damascus, e.g. to learn Arabic.

When they decided to move to Lebanon starting 2011, to be able to live in central areas of Beirut, where accommodation costs are high, many young Syrian adults belonging to the middle-class replicated the same system. They rented rooms in shared flats, or whole flats, either individually or collectively, and then sublet rooms, mainly to other young Syrians and foreigners. By comparison, only about 60% of Syrian refugees who registered with UNHCR in Beirut and its periphery were able at that time to find shelter in apart-

ments, the remaining were living in informal settlements, substandard buildings and collective centers . The proportion of registered refugees living in apartments in, and near, the Lebanese capital was however higher in comparison to the rest of the country.

For the young Syrians who had never left their home town or even family house, moving to Beirut was a drastic change in their lifestyle. However, for others who had already moved in the past within Syria, mainly from their home town to Damascus, this was rather an extension of their ‘mobility pattern’ and a replication of their previous lifestyle. Majid, a young Syrian actor, would even see a form of intergenerational continuity in this mobility. He explained that, in the past, “to find work, our parents had to move from their villages to cities in Syria, and now, because of the war, we have to change cities again” . Nevertheless, this time, it implied crossing an international border and going to another country. As a matter of fact, many of the young Syrians I encountered had never been to Beirut before, or only for very short visits. Rima, who had been in Beirut for about 9 months when I met her, would tell me in an amused way that “it is the first foreign country ever that I am visiting” .

Beirut had since long ago been an important place to come for work or stay for Syrians. This was however mostly the case for seasonal workers (e.g. construction workers) whose number in Lebanon was estimated around 350,000 before the start of the crisis in 2011 . It also concerned the elites , but not as much less well-off young adults of the middle-class.

In-between cities

When they arrived in Beirut and settled in some of its central areas, many young Syrian adults tried to pursue their previous activities. Some had even secured their new occupation before deciding to move. Arabic teachers found new language centres to teach in, a lawyer a new study to work in, an architect a new firm, a café manager started a new establishment, actors found new theatre plays and TV series to act in, and so on. For others, on the contrary, their move to Beirut signified a greater change in their life trajectories. They seized new opportunities, such as working for international NGOs dealing with the Syrian crisis. However, in addition to having family and friends still in Syria, some also kept part of their livelihoods there. They started commuting on a regular basis between Beirut and their home city in Syria, or adopted city. Actors would go back to Damascus as they were still involved in artistic projects, others were still pursuing their higher education and going back during exam periods, while some had to go back as they were still registered in professional associations (e.g. the bar association, and so on) and keeping part of their professional activities there.

These back and forth movements were possible as, until the beginning of 2015, Syria and Lebanon had an open border and free movement policy, until Lebanon started to restrict the conditions of entry and stay for Syrians on Lebanese soil. These movements from and to Damascus and other cities in Syria were also feasible by the fact that the Beirut-Damascus road was not cut-off by the fighting going on. Even if, as time passed by, more and more checkpoints of the Syrian army were set up along the road, extending travel times. Amina, a young Arabic teacher, estimated that before these delays started, to go from Beirut to Damascus “was taking barely two hours, similar to going from one Syrian governorate to another” . The Charles Helou station in central Beirut remained most of the time a vibrant transport hub with taxis

and buses regularly setting off to Damascus and other Syrian cities. Since 2015, and the change of entry requirements in Lebanon, it has however become more difficult for Syrians to continue moving back and forth.

Space of transit

Many young Syrian adults I met perceived their life in the central areas of Beirut as a form of transit. That is part of the reason why some kept strong links with their previous life back in Syria, such as with relatives and acquaintances, and even part of their activities, hoping to be able to fully and easily settle back there when possible. Others were thinking of a second move, mainly to Turkey or Europe. The perceived temporariness of their stay in the Lebanese capital was expressed in several, and sometimes colourful, ways. Rana, a young Syrian actor, would explain to me that she does not feel that “Beirut is a city which embraces you and makes you want to stay in like Damascus does” . Majid, the young actor, would tell me that in the apartment he lived in Beirut, there was a storage with all the suitcases left by other Syrians who had lived there for a while, before deciding to pursue their journey further on. They would leave behind some of their belongings, which they did not have space enough to take along, imagining maybe being able to come back later to recover them. According to him, “Beirut is like a metro station”, a place where you only transit .

The ‘transitiness’ of Beirut for some Syrians was also manifested in other ways. With numerous international flights not going to Syria anymore, Beirut airport became a hub for international transport for Syrians. Buses and vans would even bring or pick up Syrian passengers from the airport to drive them directly to Damascus. Beirut also became an administrative centre for Syrians. With many Embassies closing in Syria, most Syrians had to come to embassies located in Beirut to file their visa applications to overseas countries.

While they were ‘transiting’, and either waiting for their flights to depart or their visa applications to be proceeded, or living ‘between’ cities, some places in Beirut became well known to some young Syrian adults; which hostels to sleep in, which restaurants to eat in, and in which cafés to spend time, and most importantly, to be able to meet acquaintances, commonly friends from back in Syria who had moved to Beirut.

Syrians, or the presence of Syrians in Beirut, also started to change the landscape of Beirut’s streets. Syrian theatre plays were showed in Beirut’s theatres, Syrian restaurants and cafés opened, some Syrian products and brands could be found easily (such as Kharta yerba mate packed in Syria), and so on. While this was not completely new in Beirut, the intensity of the phenomenon became greater after 2011, and it was carried out in new ways. For example, theatre plays performed by Syrian actors would not only be showed in Beirut, as this was already the case before 2011, but now also put on in Beirut, with actors rehearsing there. The visibility of Syrians, and of Syrian ‘activities’, increased in Beirut’s streets. Amal, a young Lebanese woman, would explain that “before, for Lebanese, Syrian presence [in Lebanon] was limited to the army and migrant workers” . She was referring to the presence of the Syrian military forces in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war; presence which lasted until 2005. Amal explained that, since 2011, she now meets new categories of Syrians in Beirut, like young middle-class adults, and that this is becoming something ‘normal’. Picard mentions that there had been other categories of Syrians in the past in Beirut as well, such as businessmen, but that they were mainly ‘invisible’. However, the new interactions with



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Syrians and their visibility which started after 2011 have not always been perceived in a positive way by part of the Lebanese opinion, as reflected by a provocative article published by the newspaper An-Nahar in January 2015 entitled ‘Al-Hamra is not getting Lebanese anymore... The Syrian growth has changed its identity’ . It referred to Al-Hamra, one of the famous trendy and commercial areas of Beirut.

Besides, some of these ‘Syrian places’ also came to reflect the ‘transitiness’ of the city of Beirut for some Syrians. Some establishments indeed closed after a short period of existence. This was the case for a Syrian snack restaurant which had started a branch in Beirut and shut down after less than a year, as well as a café opened and managed in part by Syrians, and which had become an important place where young Syrians would meet and spend some of their time. Oroub, a young Syrian lawyer, was explaining, about this café, that “it’s a young Syrian who opened it. He used to run a café in Syria (...), and he tried to somehow recreate this place in Beirut”. She considered that it was an important place as, “for Syrians in Beirut, there is a loss of identity, and they like to have places like [this café] where they can meet again” .

Conclusion

By the beginning of 2016, most young Syrian adults who, at some point since 2011, I had the chance to meet in Beirut had moved further on. Some had relocated to Istanbul, while others moved to Europe ‘with a visa’ in order to study, work or re-unite with members of their family who had successfully settled there, as well as using so-called ‘irregular’ chan-

nels and roads. Overall, many Syrians are still in Beirut and living in some of its central areas, and Syrian establishments are still flourishing in the Lebanese capital.

This article has shown the importance of cities and urban centrality for some categories of migrants in a context of displacement. It has also exposed how some migrants in such a situation start living between multiple centralities and cities in different countries, sometimes including their home town, keeping links in and commuting between these different urban spaces. Finally, it has presented how this mobility between several urban centralities is often perceived as a temporary life ‘in transit’.

● 1 — All names have been changed for anonymity purposes. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and/or English. ● 2 — UNHCR. (2016b). Syrian Refugees Registered, Lebanon, 31 March 2016. Syria Refugee Response. ● 3 — UNHCR. (2016a). Distribution of the Registered Syrian Refugees at the Cadastral Level (Lebanon: Beirut and Mount Lebanon Governorates), 31 March 2016. Syria Refugee Response. ● 4 — WB/UNHCR. (2016). The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon. Washington: The World Bank. ● 5 — AUB/UN-Habitat. (2015). No Place to Stay? Reflections on the Syrian Refugee Shelter Policy in Lebanon, p.51. Beirut: UN-Habitat/American University of Beirut. ● 6 — Interview, 11.02.2013. ● 7 — Interview, 10.01.2014. ● 8 — Chalcraft, J. (2009). The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon. Stanford: Stanford University Press; ICG. (2013). Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon. Middle East Report, p.3. Brussels: International Crisis Group. ● 9 — Picard, E. (2006). Managing Identities: Expatriate Businessmen across the Syrian Lebanese Boundary. In I. Brandell (Ed.), State frontiers: Borders and boundaries in the Middle East. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. ● 10 — Interview, 08.01.2014. ● 11 — Interview, 03.01.2014. ● 12 — Interview, 11.02.2013. ● 13 — Interview 26.01.2014 ● 14 — Picard, E. (2006). Managing Identities: Expatriate Businessmen across the Syrian Lebanese Boundary, p.83. In I. Brandell (Ed.), State frontiers: Borders and boundaries in the Middle East. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. ● 15 — An-Nahar, newspaper, 06.01.2015. ● 16 — Interview 21.07.2014.